



SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2025

Xplor



SCARY
OR JUST
HAIRY?

MEET MISSOURI'S BIGGEST SPIDER

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These wild places showcase the Show-Me State in its most spectacular state.
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Pull out this poster and tape it to your wall to make your room look wild.

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Whew! Gathering nuts is hard work! But this eastern fox squirrel isn't tired. It's hot. Squirrels "sploot" to cool down when temperatures skyrocket. By placing its belly on a cool surface and spreading out its legs, the squirrel is helping heat escape from its furry body.

Xplor (ISSN 2151-8351) is published bimonthly. It is a publication of the Missouri Department of Conservation, 2901 West Truman Boulevard, Jefferson City, MO (Mailing address: PO Box 180, Jefferson City, MO 65102.) Subscription free to Missouri residents (one per household); out of state \$7 per year; out of country \$11 per year. Please allow 6-8 weeks for first issue. Notification of address change must include both old and new address (send mailing label with the subscriber number on it) with 60-day notice. Preferred periodical postage paid at Jefferson City, Missouri, and at additional entry offices. **Postmaster:** Send correspondence to *Xplor Circulation*, PO Box 180, Jefferson City, MO 65102-0180. Phone: 573-751-4115, ext. 3856.

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Send editorial comments to: **Mailing address:** *Xplor Magazine*, PO Box 180, Jefferson City, MO 65102-0180; **Email:** Xplor@mdc.mo.gov. **Please note:** *Xplor* does not accept unsolicited article queries, manuscripts, photographs, or artwork. Any unsolicited material sent will not be returned.

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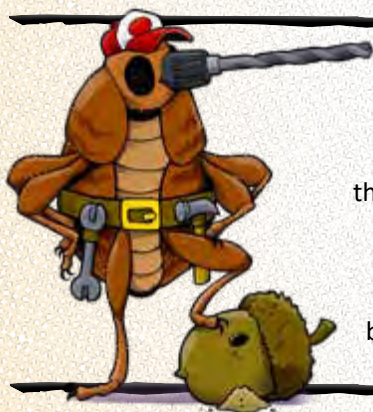
ON THE COVER

Texas Brown Tarantula

STRANGE BUT TRUE

Your guide to all the
UNUSUAL, UNIQUE,
AND UNBELIEVABLE
stuff that goes on in nature

A **CORK-LID TRAPDOOR SPIDER** weaves a lid for its burrow out of vegetation, soil, and spider silk. When an unsuspecting bug walks over the door, the spider throws it open and drags the “guest” down into the burrow for dinner.



An **ACORN WEEVIL** uses its super-sized snout like a power tool, drilling through the hard shell of an acorn, so it can munch on the nut inside. Mama weevils lay eggs inside the drill holes, ensuring their babies will have plenty to eat.

COMMON NIGHTHAWKS have one of the longest migrations of any North American bird. The narrow-winged night-flyers nest as far north as Canada and spend winter as far south as Argentina, racking up over 12,000 miles in between.



SOWBUGS and **PILLBUGS** — aka roly-polies — aren’t bugs at all. They’re crustaceans, more closely related to lobsters, shrimp, and crayfish than insects. Roly-polies live on land, but they breathe using gills like their aquatic cousins.



Neat freaks: Some people believe **BATS** are dirty, but they’re actually quite clean. They spend much of their downtime — or upside-down time — grooming their short, velvety fur like tiny, flying cats.



GIANT PUFFBALL MUSHROOMS can grow bigger than a beach ball and weigh more than 40 pounds. When you step on a puffball, a cloud of spores — mushroom “seeds” — puffs out. Large puffballs can contain over 7 trillion spores!

RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRDS

pack on fat to use as fuel during their 1,000-mile migrations. But young hummers can get too heavy. After guzzling nectar, they sometimes need to sit for a bit until they shed enough weight to fly again.



WHAT IS IT?

DON'T KNOW? Jump to Page 21 to find out.

- 1 I have a wheel on my back.
- 2 But it's not what I use to attack ...
- 3 The insects I eat for a snack ...
- 4 Before they have time to react.



TWO TRUTHS, ONE LIE

Which fascinating fact is actually a fib?

Answer on Page 21



1

These mushrooms are often found growing in clumps on rotten pumpkins, which is where the name "jack-o'-lantern mushroom" comes from.

2

A jack-o'-lantern mushroom's gills — the thin ridges on the underside of the cap — glow in the dark with a ghostly green light.

3

Jack-o'-lantern mushrooms are poisonous. Although eating one isn't *usually* lethal, it will make you *very* sick for several days.

HOW TO

PACK THE 10 OUTDOOR ESSENTIALS

Nature is fun, interesting, exciting — and unpredictable. An injury, a sudden change in the weather, or an unexpected night in the woods can turn a fun experience into a disaster. To manage whatever Mother Nature throws at you, expert adventurers recommend carrying a few basic items. Whether you're going on a day hike, an overnight campout, or a weeklong backpacking trip, be sure to stuff these 10 outdoor essentials in your pack.



1

A **MAP AND COMPASS** or a **GPS** will help you stay on the trail — or find your location if you get lost. Learn ahead of time how to use them!



2

A **HEADLAMP** or **FLASHLIGHT** will light your path if the sun sets before your hike ends. Be sure to pack a spare set of fresh batteries in a waterproof baggie.



3

A **POCKETKNIFE** is the ultimate outdoor tool. Use it to fillet fish, whittle tent stakes, cut rope, or tighten loose screws.



4

Don't get burned. Bring **SUN PROTECTION** like sunscreen, a wide-brimmed hat, and sunglasses.



5

Keep a **RAINCOAT** in your pack for sudden downpours. If the weather is cool, also pack **WARM LAYERS**, like fleece and a stocking cap.



6

Drink plenty of **WATER** — even in cool weather. Pack an extra bottle or two, even if you don't think you'll need it.



7

Calorie-dense **FOOD** — like granola bars, nuts, or trail mix — will provide your body with the energy it needs to keep moving and stay warm.



8

Pack a **LIGHTER** or **MATCHES** in a waterproof container. If you get lost, a fire will keep you warm and help search crews find you.



9

Accidents happen. Pack a small **FIRST-AID KIT** — and know how to use it — so you can treat cuts, blisters, and minor illnesses.



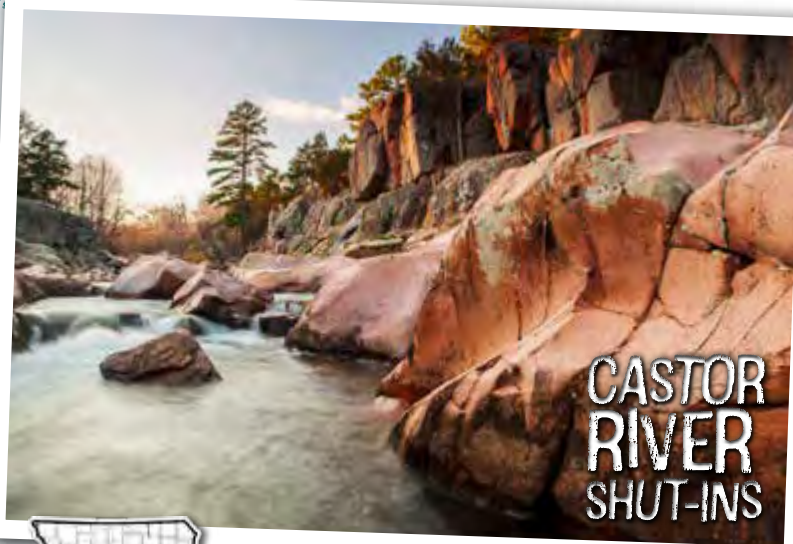
10

SHELTER — like a small tarp, bivy bag, or Mylar survival blanket — will keep you warm and dry if you have to spend an unexpected night outside.



SHOW-ME SPECTACULAR

Missouri may not have palm-lined beaches, snowcapped mountains, or a Grand Canyon. But we certainly have our share of jaw-dropping scenery. From deep blue springs where water magically bubbles out of the bedrock to waterfalls that crash down the side of Ozark cliffs, Missouri's wildest nooks and crannies will make you wonder if you're really in the Midwest. But don't take our word for it. Check out these postcards that showcase the Show-Me State in its most spectacular state.

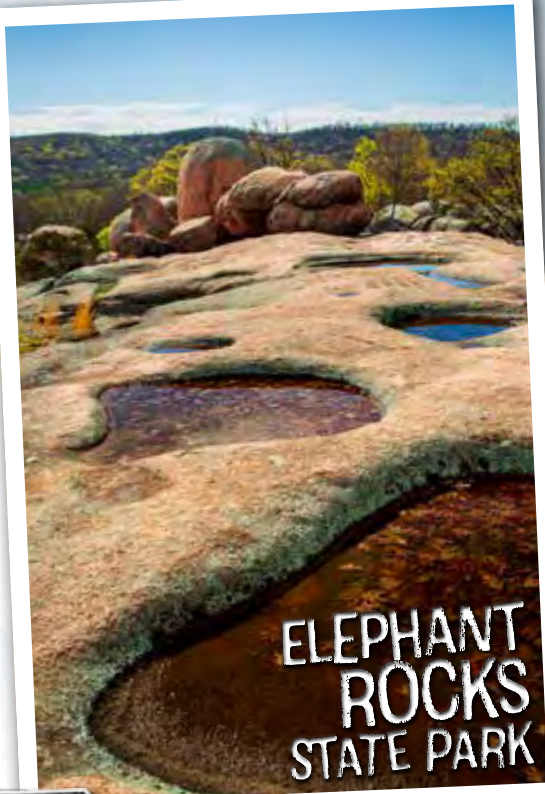


37.56888° N, 90.15506° W

In Madison County, about 10 miles east of Fredericktown.

In the northwest corner of Amidon Memorial Conservation Area, the cool, clear waters of the Castor River swirl around massive granite boulders, cascade over mini waterfalls, and churn inside deep potholes. Over millions of years, the rushing river — along with the sand and gravel that it carried — scoured away the softer rock that it once flowed over. Harder, more-resistant granite didn't wear away as quickly, and over time the river became "shut in" to a narrow, canyon-like valley.

BUCKET LIST → You don't have to snorkel a coral reef to find flashy fish. Strap on a diving mask and peer into the quiet pools downstream from the shut-ins. You'll see schools of Ozark minnows, bleeding shiners, and rainbow darters.



37.65243° N, 90.68935° W

In Iron County, about 4 miles north of Pilot Knob.

Like a parade of circus elephants, the enormous granite boulders at Elephant Rocks State Park seem to march across the rugged Ozark landscape. The largest of the rocks — nicknamed “Dumbo” — stands 27 feet tall and tips the scales at over a million pounds. The supersized stones were formed 1.5 billion years ago when hot, liquid rock, called magma, bubbled up into the Earth’s crust and cooled. Over millions of years, erosion sanded the granite into the round shapes you see today.

BUCKET LIST → Channel your inner monkey and scramble to the top of an “elephant.” Boulderling — rock climbing without a rope — is allowed at Elephant Rocks, but NEVER climb higher than you can safely fall.

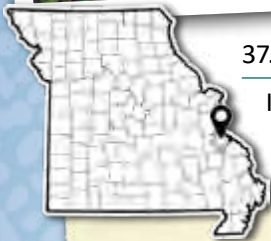
Although you won’t find any alligators lurking at Mingo National Wildlife Refuge, the soggy, cypress-speckled swamps are home to turtles, frogs, snakes, and all kinds of other water-loving critters. In the spring and fall, thousands of ducks and geese make pit stops at Mingo to rest and refuel during their long migrations. Pick up a map from the visitor center (open Wednesday and Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.), then take a hike or embark on the 17-mile drive around the 21,000-acre area.

BUCKET LIST → One of the best ways to experience the swamp is in a canoe or kayak. Paddle the refuge’s water trail in late September when cypress trees turn rusty red with fall color.



36.96927° N, 90.15166° W

In Stoddard and Wayne counties, about 2 miles north of Puxico.



37.80140° N, 90.30179° W

In Ste. Genevieve
County, about 7 miles
east of Farmington.

The best time to visit Pickle Springs is in the fall, after it rains. On the Trail Through Time you'll hike past Cauliflower Rock, through the Keyhole, and see arches and "hoodoos," pillars of sandstone weathered into unusual shapes. Trickling water provides a soundtrack for your walk, as small waterfalls drip and splash into fern-lined fairy pools. About halfway through the 2-mile loop, the trail emerges from a stand of shortleaf pines, and you'll be rewarded with a bluff-top view of oaks and hickories ablaze with fall color.

BUCKET LIST → Keep your eyes open for Ice Age animals and plants, like four-toed salamanders and hay-scented ferns. These species were more common thousands of years ago when Missouri's climate was cold and wet.



36.77964° N, 91.34535° W

In Oregon County, about 8 miles north of Alton.

On an average day at Missouri's second largest spring, over 200 million gallons of cold, clear water bubble up from the bedrock and tumble down a mile-long, rock-strewn chute into the Eleven Point River. On a hot day, fog rises off of the bone-chilling water, cloaking the fern-lined valley in mist. A shady but rugged 1-mile trail leads from the parking lot downhill to the spring.

BUCKET LIST → Although no swimming, wading, fishing, or boating is allowed in the spring channel, the nearby Eleven Point River is a great place to hook a smallmouth bass or rainbow trout.

37.56265° N, 90.73990° W

In Iron County, about
10 miles west of Ironton.

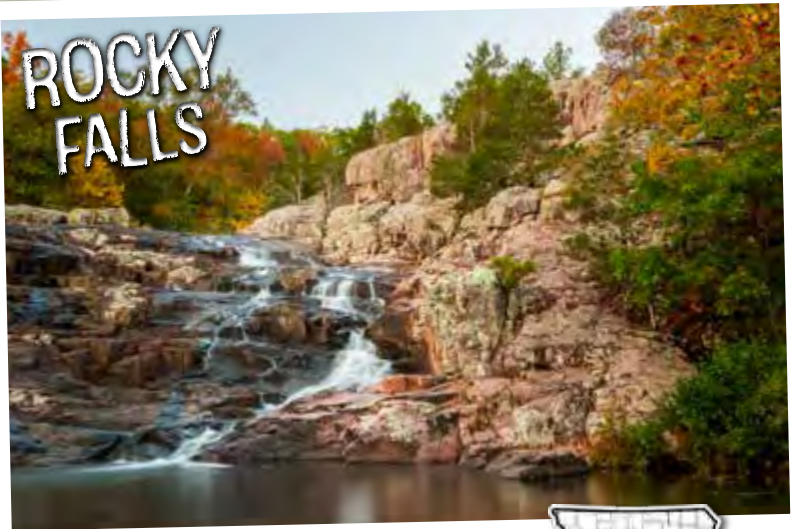


Mina Sauk Falls is the tallest waterfall in Missouri. From the rocky ledge at the top, water plunges over the side of a steep cliff to crash and splash into Taum Sauk Creek, 132 feet below. While this sounds impressive — and it is — during dry weather the falls slow to a trickle, so be sure to visit after a good rain. The 3-mile Mina Sauk Falls Trail at Taum Sauk State Park loops from a parking lot to the waterfall. The trail is steep and rugged, so wear sturdy shoes and pack plenty of water.

BUCKET LIST → On your way to the falls, stop for a photo at the rooftop of Missouri. Taum Sauk Mountain's summit, at 1,772 feet above sea level, is the tallest point in the Show-Me State.

At Rocky Falls, the water of Rocky Creek takes a rollercoaster ride over a series of pink rock ledges to splash into a pool 40 feet below. The falls, which run best after a good rain, are part of the National Park Service's Ozark Scenic Riverways. The short trail from the parking lot to the falls intersects the Ozark Trail, a 400-mile path that stretches from St. Louis to Arkansas, passing through some of the prettiest, wildest, and most rugged parts of Missouri along the way.

BUCKET LIST → Pack your swimsuit. At the base of the falls, a refreshing swimming hole offers a scenic spot to cool off on a hot summer day.



37.09492° N, 91.21023° W

In Shannon County, about 9
miles southeast of Eminence.



38.03055° N, 91.98183° W

In Maries County, about 8 miles east of Dixon.



A short but rugged hike from the parking lot at Clifty Creek Natural Area will lead you to one of Missouri's most impressive geologic wonders. Spanning across the clear waters of the creek is a 40-foot-long bridge of rock that wouldn't look out of place in the Desert Southwest. The bridge was formed when a tributary of Clifty Creek took a shortcut through a crack in a steep ridge of rock. Over time, the water eroded the rock into the arch you see today.

BUCKET LIST → Pack a field guide! More than 450 different kinds of plants have been found at Clifty Creek. How many can you spot?

EASTERN SCREECH-OWL



SILENT FLIGHT

The edges of an owl's flight feathers are fuzzy and soft. This muffles air rushing over them, allowing the owl to swoop down silently.

FAKE EARS

The pointy things atop a screech-owl's head aren't ears. They're tufts of feathers. Its ears are hidden under feathers on its face.





RADAR DISH FACE

Feathers on a screech-owl's face form a bowl that funnels faint sounds — like the squeak of a hidden mouse — to the owl's ears.

ALL BUT INVISIBLE

The camouflage pattern on a screech-owl's feathers helps the owl disappear against a barky background.

JEEPERS PEEPERS!

A screecher's oversized eyes see well in the dark. But owls can't move their eyeballs. They have to turn their head to look left or right.

PINT-SIZED PREDATOR

Fully grown, a screech-owl is barely bigger than a bean can. Robins and blue jays both stand taller than these stocky, 8-inch owls.



Gentle GIANTS

THEY'RE BIG.
THEY'RE HAIRY.
BUT ARE THEY REALLY SCARY?

As the sun sinks over an Ozark glade, birds quit singing, collared lizards bustle off to bed, and the night shift for this dry, rocky habitat shows up for work. Mice scurry about, gathering seeds in the safety of darkness. An owl hoots nearby, reminding the rodents that night doesn't hide them nearly as well as they hope. And, from an almost invisible hole at the base of a lichen-covered rock, a furry, eight-legged predator creeps out into the gloom.

The Texas brown tarantula is Missouri's largest — and some might say, spookiest — spider. From the tip of its fangs to the end of its abdomen, a tarantula's body can stretch over 2 inches long. Girls grow slightly larger than boys and can weigh more than some songbirds. Add in eight furry legs, and you end up with a spider that's nearly as big as a tea saucer. It's no wonder why some folks are scared of them.

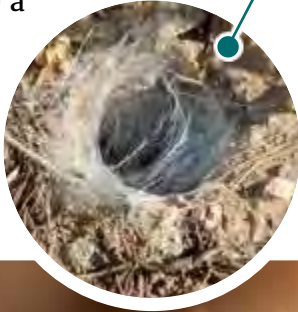
But though they look ferocious, tarantulas are surprisingly shy and go to great lengths to avoid people and predators.



HOME SWEET HOLE

Tarantulas are homebodies, spending the bulk of their lives hiding in a hole. Sometimes a spider will dig its own burrow, using its fangs and pedipalps to excavate loose soil. (See Page 15 for spider anatomy.) At other times, it moves into an existing burrow after the original owner — perhaps a mouse or a lizard — leaves.

Although tarantulas don't weave webs, they often line their burrows with silk. They also weave a "welcome mat" of webbing at the burrow's entrance. When an animal wanders by and steps on the mat, the silk transfers tiny vibrations down inside the hole, like a doorbell alerting the tarantula that someone — food or foe? — has arrived for a visit.



DINING IN OR DINING OUT?

Tarantulas are perfectly happy to let dinner come to them. When an insect strays across the entrance to its burrow, the tarantula lunges out and nabs it, like a middle-schooler plucking a pizza delivery off the front porch.

If dinner doesn't arrive at its doorstep, the spider has to leave the safety of its burrow and go on the hunt. Because its eight eyes are nearly useless, a tarantula must feel its way around using its pedipalps and sensitive hairs on its legs. Wandering in this way is slow and dangerous. Lizards, birds, and even wolf spiders would love to make these meaty morsels into a meal.

But when a tarantula encounters a cricket, beetle, or caterpillar, it turns — in an instant — from bumbling prey into a powerful predator. Like an eight-legged lion, the spider pounces and stabs its hollow, half-inch-long fangs into the victim. The needle-sharp teeth inject venom, which quickly kills the prey and turns its insides to mush. This makes it easier for the spider to slurp up. *Yum!*

Although tarantula venom is deadly to insects, it isn't harmful to humans. A tarantula bite may make you yell "ouch!" but it won't leave you any worse off than a bee sting.





A TARANTULA'S WORST NIGHTMARE

Who knows if tarantulas have bad dreams? If they do, thoughts of a feisty, electric-blue wasp likely make them toss and turn in their silk-lined beds.

The wasp in question is called a tarantula hawk. Adult wasps don't eat spiders — they sip nectar for food. But when a mama T-hawk is ready to lay an egg, she buzzes off to catch the biggest spider she can spot.

The 2-inch-long wasp's business end is tipped with a stinger as long as your pinkie nail. One well-placed poke from this stun gun bun delivers a searing sting that can paralyze a spider in seconds.

When a tarantula feels threatened, it rears up on its back legs and shows off its formidable fangs. If that fails to scare away an attacker, the spider plucks arrow-sharp hairs off its belly and slings them at the threat. The barbed bristles pepper the attacker's skin and eyes, giving the spider time to scurry away.

Unfortunately, neither the fangs nor the *hair-rows* usually work on a mama T-hawk. The wasp buzzes around, dodging the spider's attacks, waiting until she sees an opening. When the spider rears up, the wasp slides under its body, and delivers a fateful sting.

Once the spider stops struggling, the wasp uses hooked spines on her legs to drag the tarantula back to her nest. There she lays a single egg on the unmoving but still living spider. After the egg hatches, the baby wasp will feed on the still-fresh tarantula for nearly a month.



DEFENSE
MODE



TARANTULA
GOT COOKED

Tarantula-natomy

The **CHELICERAE** (*keh-liss-air-uh*) are a spider's jaws. They're tipped with large, sharp fangs that a tarantula uses to defend itself or inject venom into prey. A tarantula's mouth is hidden under its chelicerae.

PEDIPALPS look like legs, but a tarantula doesn't use them to walk. Instead, they help the spider handle food and sense objects it encounters.

Like most spiders, a tarantula has eight **EYES** but poor eyesight. The eyes can spot movement and tell light from dark, but that's about it.

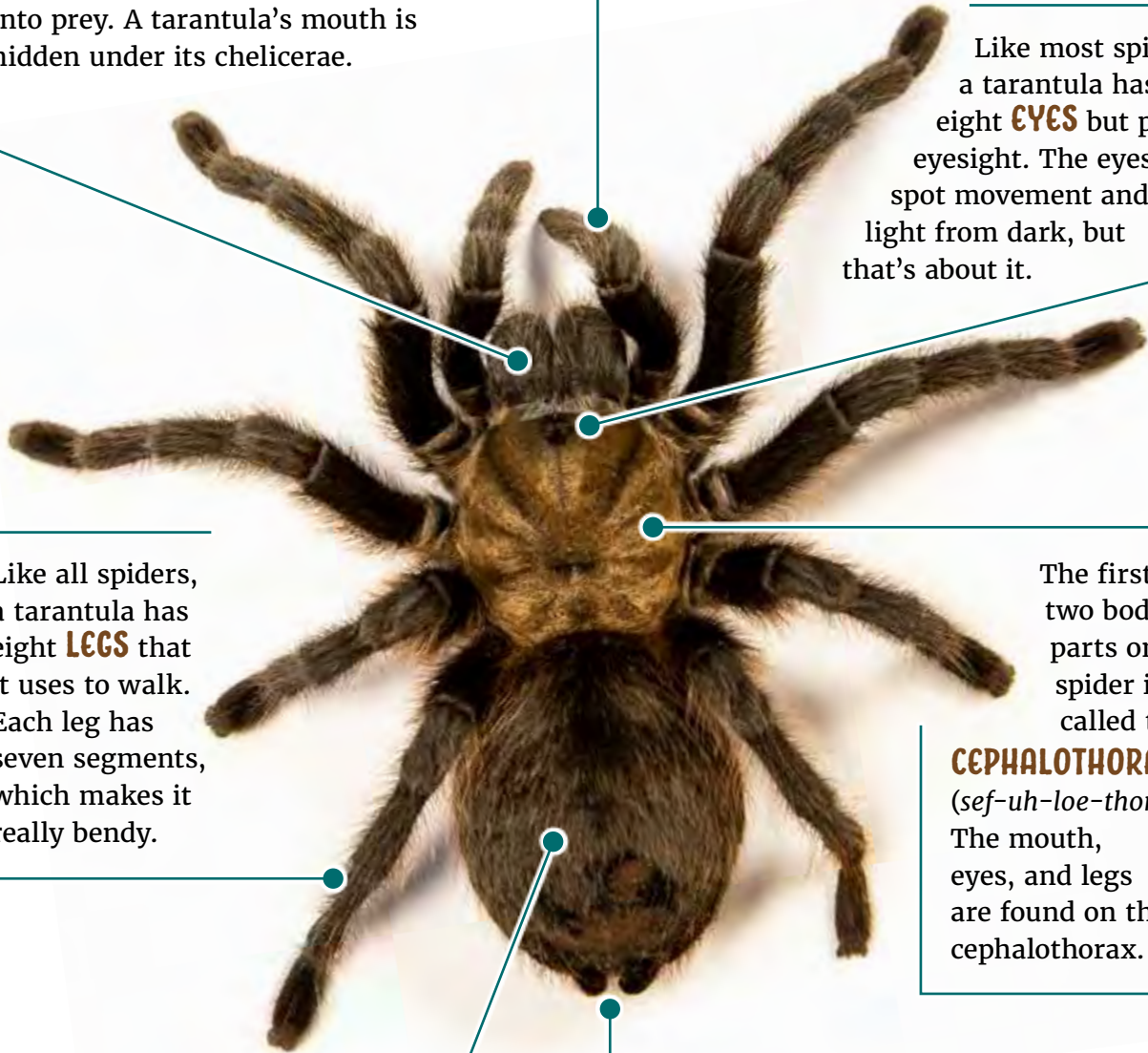
Like all spiders, a tarantula has eight **LEGS** that it uses to walk. Each leg has seven segments, which makes it really bendy.

The first of two body parts on a spider is called the

CEPHALOTHORAX (*sef-uh-loe-thor-ax*). The mouth, eyes, and legs are found on the cephalothorax.

The second body part is the **ABDOMEN**. It contains the digestive tract, lungs, and other important organs.

Liquid silk leaves a spider's body through the **SPINNERETS**. When the silk hits air, it becomes solid and stringy.





THE SEARCH
BEGINS ...



PLEASE DON'T
EAT ME!

LOVE HURTS

Life for a tarantula is risky. And for males, finding a girlfriend can make life even riskier. Food is food, and tarantulas rarely pass up a meal — even if it happens to be a fellow spider. So when a lovestruck male meets a female, two things can happen: He'll either find a mate or have the worst (and last) day of his life.

In September and October, males leave their safe, cozy burrows to zigzag over glades and scurry across roads, looking for romance. A male uses his pedipalps to follow a scent trail to a female's burrow. When he arrives, he taps on the silk around the doorway, hoping to convince the larger female that he isn't prey. If he's lucky, the female crawls out of her burrow, and the male lays on the charm by performing an eight-legged tap dance.

Even if the female lets him be her boyfriend, the male still dies within a year after mating. Males rarely make it past their 10th birthday, but females may live longer than 20 years.



SLINGS DOING
THEIR THING



EGG SAC

NUMBERS GAME

After mating, a mama tarantula spends winter nestled deep in her burrow. The following summer she lays 100 to 1,000 eggs, bundles them up in a silken sack, and hangs the sack on the side of her burrow like a baby hammock.

Around August, tiny tarantulas hatch out of the hammock. The babies are called “slings.” They stay in mom’s burrow, under her protection, until they’ve grown large enough to survive on their own.

To grow bigger, a tarantula must molt. Instead of bones, spiders have hard plates on the outside of their bodies called an exoskeleton. The exoskeleton is like armor — it doesn’t stretch. So when a spider’s insides outgrow its outsides, the spider pumps fluid into its abdomen, causing the exoskeleton to split open. Once a crack forms, the spider pulls its body out of the old exoskeleton and begins to form a new one. Baby tarantulas shed their exoskeletons every few

weeks. After they reach adult size, they rarely molt more than once a year.

Life gets tough for the tiny slings when they leave mom’s burrow. Predators — like lizards and birds — abound, and finding a safe hole of their own takes a heavy toll. That’s why mama tarantulas have so many babies. With luck, a few of them will live long enough to become hairy, not-so-scary, gentle giants.



XPLOR MORE

CROWDED KETTLE

In late September, broad-winged hawks begin migrating through Missouri to spend winter in Central America and the Amazon. To save energy during what might be a 4,000-mile flight, broad-wings ride rising air currents high into the sky. As the hawks go up, up, up, they circle round and round like soup noodles stirred by an invisible spoon. These flocks or “kettles” often contain hundreds of broad-wings plus other hawks, falcons, eagles, and vultures hitching a ride on the same air currents. When the birds get high enough, they glide forward to catch the next updraft.

Instructions

There are six different birds of prey swirling in this kettle. How many of each kind can you find? Write the number in the box beside each bird. Read the hints if you need help.

BROAD-WINGED HAWK

White underwings with dark edges; black and white tail bands same width.



TURKEY VULTURE

Small pink head; two-toned wings (dark near body, light flight feathers).



RED-SHOULDERED HAWK

Dark underwings; black tail with narrow white bands.





PEREGRINE FALCON

Wings end in sharp points; white throat with dark "helmet" on head.



BALD EAGLE

Brown body; white head and tail; huge beak. Young eagles are blotchy brown.



RED-TAILED HAWK

Solid-colored tail (usually red); dark marks on leading edge of wings.



Answers: Broad-winged hawk - 3; Turkey vulture - 4; Red-shouldered hawk - 5; Peregrine falcon - 4; Bald eagle - 5; Red-tailed hawk - 6

GET OUT!

FUN THINGS TO DO
AND GREAT PLACES
TO DISCOVER NATURE



Not all spiders spin delicate, beautiful webs. **PURSEWEB SPIDERS** live in tough silken tubes that look like dirty socks. Search the bottoms of tree trunks for the 6- to 12-inch-long tubes. Mosses and lichens may grow on them, which makes the spider's house look like a stubby vine.



When life gives you lemons, **MAKE LEMONADE**. If you're lemonless, find some sumac. Sumac is a shrub that forms thickets along roadsides and fencerows. In September, it produces cone-shaped clusters of rusty-red berries. Collect a dozen clusters and shake out the bugs. Submerge the clusters in a bowl of water, and rub the berries until the water turns pink. Strain the water through a towel into a pitcher. Add sugar and ice, then toast the end of summer.

The Katy Trail is Missouri's longest and skinniest state park. Late September, when temperatures cool and trees begin to blaze, is a perfect time to **BIKE A STRETCH OF THE KATY**. Nearly a dozen conservation areas line the trail and offer places to fish, camp, explore, or make a scenic pit stop. To plan your trip, pedal over to katytrailstatepark.com.



In mid-September, orange-and-black **MONARCH BUTTERFLIES** flutter thousands of miles south to spend winter in Mexico. You can help biologists track their movements by catching migrating monarchs and sticking tiny identification tags on their wings. Learn how at monarchwatch.org/tagging.



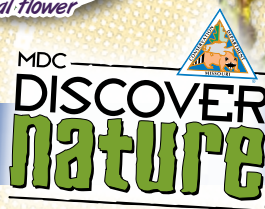
October is a great month to catch one last look at colorful **WILDFLOWERS**. Look for goldenrods gleaming along roadsides, purple asters brightening the edges of pastures and woodlands, and cardinal flowers blazing along Ozark streams.



PURSEWEB SPIDER: DAVID BRUNS



Looking for more ways to have fun outside? Find out about Discover Nature programs in your area at mdc.mo.gov/events.



WHAT
IS
IT?

— FROM PAGE 3 —



WHEEL BUG

Wheel bugs, named for their round backs, are inch-long predators that prowl gardens and grasslands throughout Missouri. When a wheel bug corners a meal, such as a beetle, it stabs the victim using its pointy snout. The predator's spit turns the prey's insides to goo, which the wheel bug slurps up like a smoothie. Although these six-legged assassins can't permanently harm people, it's best to watch them from a distance. Their bite hurts worse than a bee sting.

GO FIND IT!



Cut out this critter card and take it with you outside.
How many of the things on the card can you find?

WOOLLY BEAR CATERPILLAR



WIGGLY BOTTLE BRUSH

Woolly bears are spiked with stiff hairs. When threatened, they curl up in a ball so the hairs poke outward.

NOT PICKY ABOUT PLANTS

Some caterpillars eat only a few kinds of plants. Not woolly bears. They eat nearly any plant.

SNUG AS A BUG

During winter, woolly bears curl up under leaf litter and wood piles to hide from predators like birds. Antifreeze in their body keeps them from freezing.

FUZZY FORECASTERS?

Can a woolly bear's stripes predict winter weather? No, but according to folklore, a wide brown band means a mild winter, while a narrow one predicts a severe winter.

FLYING TIGERS

In spring, woolly bears spin cocoons. Two weeks later, they emerge as Isabella tiger moths.

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FREE TO MISSOURI HOUSEHOLDS

GO FIND IT! ≡

Watch for these fuzzy caterpillars wiggling across roads throughout Missouri in October — they move about 4 feet per minute. To learn more, crawl over to **mdc.mo.gov/field-guide**.

WOOLLY BEAR CATERPILLAR

